Connecticut Historical Society
BULLETIN

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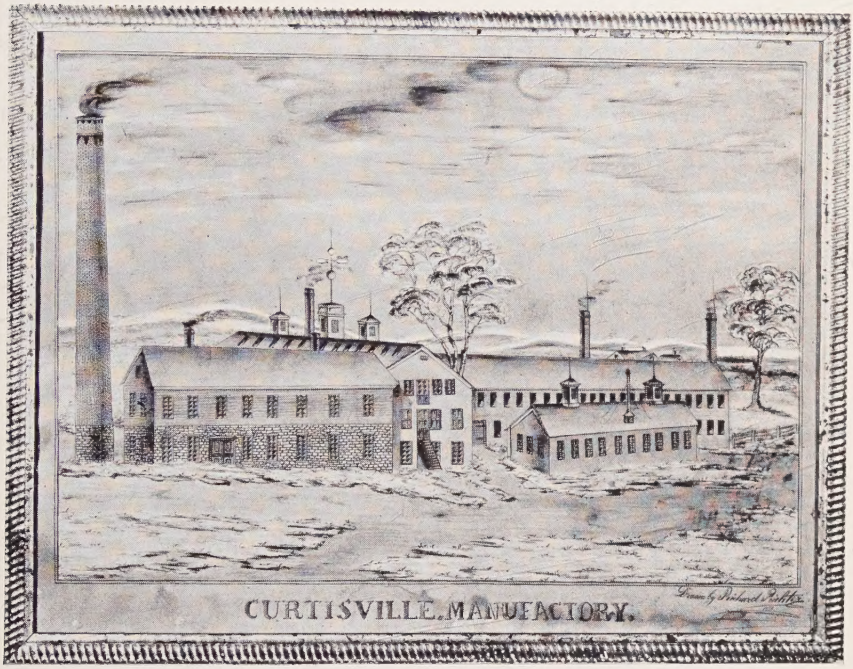


Curtisville Manufactory, Colored charcoal drawing, by Richard Richter, 1855, 17 x 22½ inches.

The discovery of a large rolled painting in one of our store rooms led to a very unusual sequence of events which will not be ended until the letters resulting from this article have been received.

Last summer we found a primitive painting, signed by James Rabbeth, of a factory and a number of houses, labelled Curtisville. We hoped this would prove to be in Connecticut but research failed to locate any clues. Subsequently it was exhibited at a meeting of the Society and Jared B. Standish immediately identified the scene as being in Naubuc, now the site of the Williams Brothers Silver Company.

From that time forward information on this concern has come from many sources. Ray W. Bidwell, Recorder of the Glastonbury Historical Society,

deposited with us two drawings by Richard Richter, dated 1855 and 1856 respectively: one almost a copy of the painting, and the other a detailed close-up of the main factory building. (illus. p. 9).

Mr. Bidwell referred us to Dr. Lee Jay Whittles, of Glastonbury, who owned several pieces of silverware and a pistol that were manufactured in this factory. Dr. Whittles generously permitted us to photograph these articles (page 11 & 14) for inclusion in our *Bulletin,* volunteered much information on the Curtis family and contacted others in our behalf. One example of a product from this development was most elusive. Ice skates, known as "Glastonbury Runners", were made there and specimens were around only a few years ago, but upon inquiry they were no longer available. Finally, however, a pair was secured which, through the courtesy of Dr. Whittles, is on exhibition in our museum.

From the files of the late William G. Snow, Director of Historical Research of the International Silver Company, additional information on Curtisville was secured. Much of our data is confused, contradicted from other sources. We are publishing it herewith in an attempt to clear the record and as an excellent example of what the Historical Society is doing. We have a record of the company, an illustration, a specimen of their products and information as to other sources. That is but one phase of the activities of this Society, but illustrates the methods used to secure information and materials on a particular subject.

According to one source, Frederick Curtis commenced the manufacture of silverware in Hartford sometime in 1834. This does not agree with the City Directories which were first published in 1838, for they do not list Curtis, until 1842. In any event, Frederick Curtis and his brother Joseph S. Curtis, manufactured German silverware, spoons and spectacles at 1 Asylum Street for a number of years. About 1846 they moved to Glastonbury though their office continued in Hartford. The first notice of partnership appeared January 24, 1848 and for a time the company operated under the name of F. Curtis & Co.

The Glastonbury Land Records show that on February 1, 1847, Frederick Curtis leased from Fraray Hale, 18½ acres [with] dwelling houses and grist mill. This was located on Salmon Brook at what is now House Street. There are no records that indicate when or if silverware was made at this site. From 1846 to 1856, Frederick and his brother purchased numerous pieces of land on Salmon Brook about a mile below the above "grist mill" site. About 18 acres were acquired and on this second site the plant of F. Curtis & Company was erected about 1850, a portion of which may have been the Oswin Wells Cigar Company factory which was purchased during this period. Wells' Directory of Hartford for 1850 gives a list of the products made:

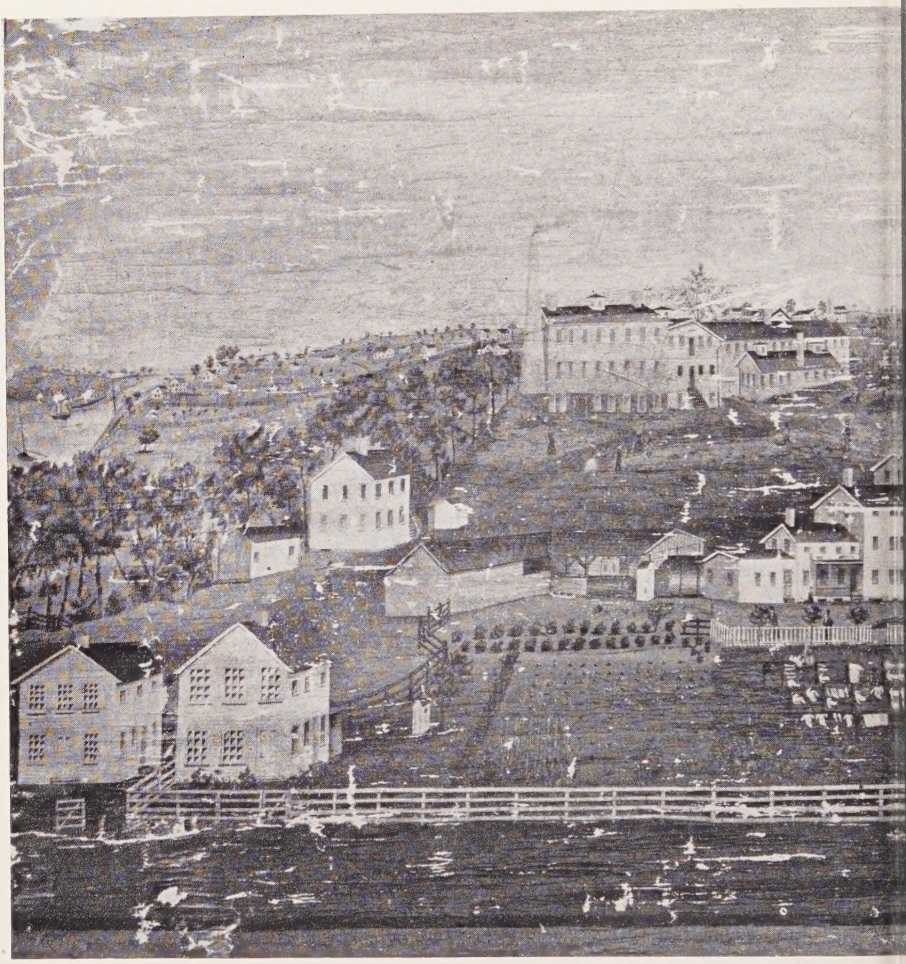
> F. Curtis & Co. Manufacturers of German Silver and fine silver plated goods, Spoons, Forks, Butter knives, Castors, Spectacles, Spec Cases, Tobacco Boxes, Silver Spectacles, &c. Wholesale Dealers in Sewing Silk, Ivory Combs, &c., No. 1 Asylum st., Hartford. Office, 85 William st., corner Maiden Lane, N.Y.

Cake basket, Curtisville Manufacturing Company, c. 1858.

On September 18, 1854, F. Curtis & Company was reorganized under the name of Curtisville Manufacturing Company with Charles Benedict as President and R. F. Fowler, Secretary and Treasurer. From existing information it seems doubtful whether Frederick Curtis had any interest in the Curtisville Manufacturing Company, for they maintained separate offices in Hartford at 8 and 10 Asylum Street. By 1857 the region occupied by the factory was called Curtisville with its own postmaster, Albert A. Bogue. Though this seems to have been the peak of their business, there is evidence of further reorganization so that the endeavor may never have been profitable.

Just what this reorganization was we are not yet able to determine, but in 1859 Thomas J. Vail assumed the Presidency and the Curtis family no longer appeared in the Hartford listings. The directory for 1860 has the following notice:

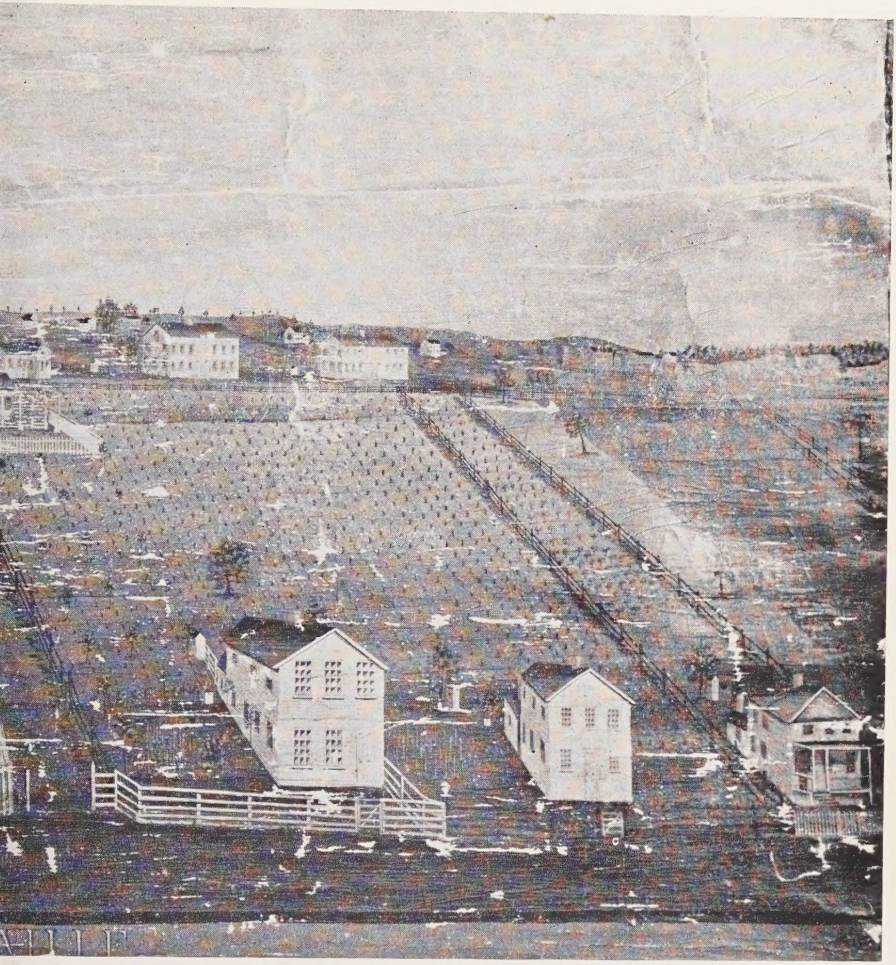
> Curtisville Manufacturing Co. T. J. Vail, President. Office, 248 Main street, (after 18th August, 268 Main street.) Manufacturers of



Curtisville, painted, oil on canva

SILVER PLATED GOODS in great variety: including the latest styles of Spoons, Forks, Ladles; Pie, Cake and Ice Cream Knives; Tea Sets, Casters, Cake Baskets, Communion Sets, Cups, Goblets, Waiters, Soup Tureens, Vegetable Dishes, &c., &c. Plated on the best quality of metals, and warranted full weight of Silver. Also, German Silver Plated and Steel-framed Spectacles, of all kinds. Also, Spectacle Cases and Tobacco Boxes.

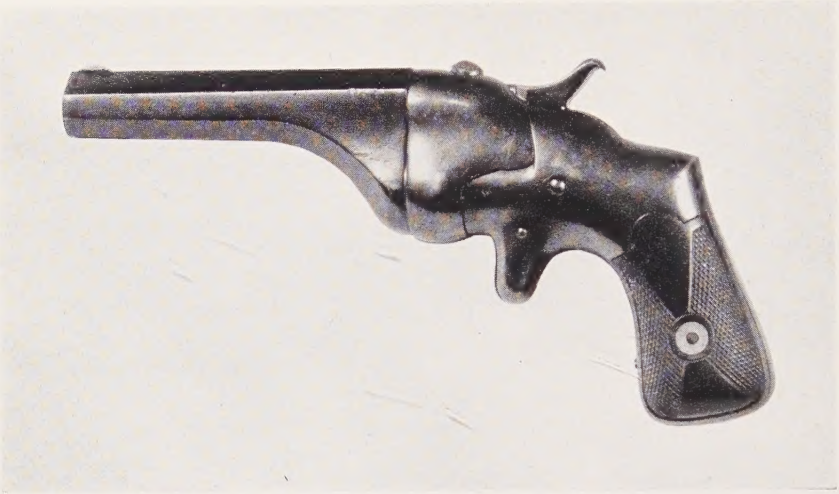
The Civil War necessitated the manufacture of war materials and at the May session of the Connecticut General Assembly, the Connecticut Arms and Manufacturing Company was incorporated by Thomas J. Vail, Joseph A. Veazie, John D. Sargent, Arthur Pickering, Henry Blaney, George



th, c. 1855. 32½ x 65¼ inches.

Woodman, George H. Fox, Edwin F. Waters and Edward Richmond. On September 26, 1863, the Curtisville Manufacturing Company conveyed to this new organization all its property, described as four parcels of land of 18 acres, "with all buildings thereon with dam and flowage rights," also, "the main shafting and belting in the buildings . . . with steam engine and boiler connected therewith." From about this time the section of Glastonbury was called Naubuc, by which name it is still called. In the 1865 Directory, the entry notes this change in name:

> Connecticut Arms and Manufacturing Company, manufactory and post-office address NAUBUC (formerly Curtisville), Hartford county, Conn.



Pistol, Connecticut Arms and Manufacturing Company, c. 1863.

> Thos. J. Vail, President, Hartford Conn.; Jos. A. Veazie, Treasurer, Boston Mass.; G. T. Thompson, Secretary, Glastenbury, Conn.

Both rifles and pistols were made by this company, for specimens have recently appeared on the market. There are also broadside circulars in existence, though we have been unable to locate a copy. The tax lists for 1866 rate this company at approximately $88,600, $8,000 of which was in goods produced. Subsequent tax lists show a steady decline until 1869 when the Norwich Savings Society apparently foreclosed a mortgage they had held for some years.

Between the end of the war and this foreclosure, Thomas J. Vail probably continued the silver plating business, for in the Hartford Directory for 1869 he is listed:

> Thos. J. Vail, Manufacturer of German Silver and Plated Ware, Plated and Steel Spectacle Frames and Lenses: Manufactory at Naubuc, (Glastenbury) Conn.

In 1870 a new concern entered the picture when the property was held jointly by the banks and American Sterling Company of Glastonbury. This firm was in turn bought out within a few years by James B. and William Williams, who started the Williams Brothers Silver Company which is still in existence.

James Rabbeth, Jr., who painted the picture of Curtisville, was born in London, England in 1824. He married Nancy Alvord, of Glastonbury, on April 26, 1858 and died shortly thereafter, for she is listed as widow of James in the list of Church Members of the First Church of Christ, published in 1859. Of Richard Richter we can find no record. Why two drawings and a painting were made of this scene, we do not know. They are

important examples of primitive art and are interesting additions to our materials on this particular local industry, whose history we have here sketched.

Funds are urgently needed for the restoration of the James Rabbeth painting. It has been rolled for many years and the paint is now rapidly flaking from the canvas. If this is to be preserved, it should be relined and some retouching would be necessary, but since it is an interesting primitive, we feel it is sufficiently important to warrant preservation. Contributions towards this end will be gratefully received.

NEWS OF THE SOCIETY

One of the most important announcements in years is the receipt of a grant of $7,000 from the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving with which to establish a cataloguing project in the library. The first step toward a new building is to determine the amount of space necessary for books. Since we do not have an adequate catalogue, we do not know what we have and, in many cases, we cannot find things we do have, for the existing records make no mention of location or classification. With a complete catalogue, which we estimate will require about ten years to compile, we will then have a definite record of our holdings, and will be able to fill in gaps which are discovered, dispose of irrelevant materials, locate duplicates, unlock the mass of resources here, and in the end have a definite knowledge of the space needed to adequately house our collection. The grant made will make only a dent in this tremendous task, but through it we will be able to prove its worth and we hope to secure funds from other sources for its completion. The Society was exceedingly fortunate to secure, under the terms of the grant, the services of Miss Jessie Parsons who recently retired as assistant to the State Archivist after many years of library experience.

President Edgar F. Waterman has presented the remainders of *The Waterman Genealogy* and *The Granberry Genealogy,* which were compiled by Donald Lines Jacobus and published by the donor. The increment received from the sale of these volumes is to be used to establish the Edgar F. Waterman Fund, the income of which is to be available for general expenses. These volumes are welcome additions to our list of publications for sale for the benefit of the library.

Samuel St. John Morgan has augmented an earlier gift of Kellogg prints by presenting twenty-four additional examples of the artistry of the Kelloggs, lithographers in Hartford. Half of these depict Abraham Lincoln in various poses, of which several are identical except for reversal of stone, the addition of a beard, or the alteration of captions such as "Candidate for President" to "President." Also of interest are a number of political cartoons and likenesses of other presidents. It is surprising that we had collected so few examples of the products of this early Hartford concern and that there has been so little local interest in them. Mr. Morgan's gifts have made our collection of Kellogg prints one of the largest in any institution. We hope the definitive collection of lithographs of this concern, still in existence, will be made here.

"Why Look Backward?" was the title of a paper read at the January meeting by the Reverend Harris E. Starr, of New Haven, who set forth three reasons for the foundation and preservation of historical societies. He stated that the lessons of the past should be studied in order to avoid future mistakes, and that both inspiration and warning are to be gathered from a study of our national history.

Ernest Caulfield, M.D., of West Hartford, was the speaker at the February meeting, his subject being "Some Common Diseases of Colonial Children." Dr. Caulfield discussed many of the epidemic diseases of colonial days, including measles, diphtheria, scarlet fever, whooping cough and dysentery, and he also touched on the many fatal accidents which befell the children of long ago.

A delightful talk by Mrs. Nina Fletcher Little, of Brookline, Massachusetts was the feature of the March meeting. The subject, "Dating and Restoring New England Houses," was of universal interest, as evidenced by the record attendance of more than one hundred persons. Mrs. Little illustrated her talk with exceptionally fine lantern slides, showing many New England buildings, both exterior and interior, before and after restoration.

ASAPH SMITH'S ACCOUNT BOOK

(Continued from page 8)

March
31 Cyprian Stanley Aged
April 8 Wid Mary Peck Aged
Shelden Standleys Child
Wife of Gideon Dunham May 3 52
John Cole
Linas Clarck
James Dunham August 27 Aged
Child of Ira Kents Aged
Charles Elton Sep^{t} 21 Aged
On ^{the} 27 Frederick Elton Aged
On th 26 Thomas Hart Aged 45
Deaths In the year 1839
Feb^{r} 28 David Chapman
An Account of Deaths
In the year 1831
Jan^{r} 19 The W^{d} of Samuel Hart
Feb 6 the W^{d} Simeon Norton Aged 77
Feb^{r} 27 Stephen Norton Died Aged 54
March 28 Doc^{t} Cyprian H. Heart died
Aged 30

(To be continued)

The Price of these Bulletins is ten cents each.